

CNMI-Only Transitional Worker Program to end by 2029

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Living my whole life on this beautiful island of Saipan, I have inherited different cultural values, respecting one another, and welcoming everyone to our home island. During my younger years, I lived next to the Marianas Variety barracks. I grew up with many contract workers who I consider my family, and as well my mother was a contract worker. I also was given the privilege to work at Marianas Variety as an accountant clerk. Working with these individuals in the accounting department who were contract workers has taught me different skills that enhance my knowledge to a great extent in accounting. In 2011 the contract worker program handled by the CNMI government ended, and the U.S Department of labor took over the contract worker program (Gootnick, 2020). Therefore, having experience with these individuals makes me think about how it would affect the CNMI if we lost these contract workers. Such as certified nurses, construction workers, accountants, engineers, and specialized individuals with the experience and certification, which many local people have not pursued yet. The CNMI-Only Transitional Worker Program, which will end in 2029 (Gootnick, 2020). This community issue will impact the CNMI tremendously by several factors. Many businesses will close due to a lack of specialized individuals, and most importantly the only hospital we have will not be able to fully fill adequate health care to the people of the CNMI.

The CNMI-Only Transitional Worker Program was established on September 7, 2011, when the U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services issued a final rule establishing a transitional work permit program in the CNMI for foreign workers

(Gootnick, 2020). Based on the data collected by the U.S Government Accountability Office, the amount of CW 1 visa workers in 2012 was 22,416 (Gootnick, 2020). Each year, the amount of CW1workers should have lessened. The original CW1 program was supposed to expire in 2018. Although the USCIS expanded the program till December 31st, 2029. Another improvement back in 2017 is that the USCIS added about 350 CW1 permits which help extend the existing permits for construction and extraction occupation. (Gootnick, 2020).

The current count of CW1 workers as of 2020 is about 13,000 (Cagurangan, 2020), and the current CNMI population is 57,664 (*Northern Mariana Islands Population (LIVE)*). Based on data from 2018 the number of foreign workers is 14,095, whereas the U.S worker is 15,534 (Gootnick, 2020). The main concern is where are we going to get employees to fill these jobs with specific certification needs? Where will we find people to help ensure the safety and accuracy needed, especially in the health industry field?

An ultrasound technician or certified nurse is an excellent asset to the CNMI because we lack individuals who hold medical licenses or specialized jobs certification. The other concern based on Governor Torres' speech, was that they try to hire U.S citizens to work in the CNMI, but because our minimum wage is at \$7.55, whereas in the stateside their minimum wage average is from 13 to 15 dollars an hour (*US Senate Hearing on NMI US Workforce Act 2018*). An article issued by Marianas Variety on September 16, 2020, stated that about 18 health care workers were denied temporary labor certification for the CW1 renewal petition (User & Lori Lyn C. Lirio - - Variety News Staff, 2019. During this pandemic (COVID virus), we need these health care workers to serve our community.

I have conducted a base survey with CW1 workers, CNMI residence, and Business owners. A total of two business owners, eight CNMI residents, and six CW 1 workers. The survey consists of different questions concerning the CW1 worker's program to end in 2029. The result was too problematic, and I learned some great news I didn't know existed. First, let's start with the CW 1 workers. I asked what you think would happen to the CNMI if the CW1 worker program ended by 2029 ?. They stated that the CNMI would be empty, several businesses will close, and the economy will go down. The next question I asked them was, "What are some ideas that you think can help the CNMI with this community issue?" They responded that they wish that USCIS extended the CW1 visa program or help them get CNMI long-term residence.

Whereas the CNMI Residence, I ask them "What are some struggles you think may occur once the CW1 worker program ends in 2029?" Their response was that the CNMI will lack people who want to work and there will be a decline in the workforce. An answer that caught my attention was when they stated it might cause humanitarian issues that leads to the breaking up of families. Another question was, "What are some ideas that can help solve this community issue?" The response was similar to the CW 1 Worker. A group of people said that extending the CW1 program, or giving long-term residency to the CW1 workers provides a better opportunity. They also suggested providing training programs, open up trade schools and other programs to help enhance skills.

Lastly, I ask similar questions from business owners. The response was tremendously great news. One of the questions I asked was, "What are your thoughts on the CW1 Worker Program to end 2029?" A business owner stated the program seems to be trending towards the H-visa program, which is much more feasible for businesses since the approvals are for three years with extensions up to 5 years instead of every year's approval process for CW1 permits. This response is out of my knowledge, which I need to further my understanding of this H Visa program but it would be an excellent program for CW 1 workers. Secondly, I asked "As a business owner or a manager, what are some alternative results to accommodate this community issue?" (CW1 Worker program to end by 2029). The response was, "The CNMI needs to invest better in trade schools to teach CNMI citizens skill sets to augment the foreign workforce. While all jobs cannot be replaced, the CNMI will be in a better position by 2029 with a qualified local labor pool to reduce foreign labor reliance".

After conducting my survey with several individuals, I realized several possibilities could resolve the CW1 visa worker issue. First, The CNMI government can ask the USCIS to extend the CW1 visa program. Secondly, the CNMI should open a trades school to teach CNMI citizens skillset to augment the foreign workforce. Third, business owners can have their employees apply for the H-2 visa, which will last for about three to five years. Lastly, provide CW 1 visa workers a long-term residency to avoid breaking up the families with children who are born here in the CNMI. My reason is that their kids will be able to sponsor their parents to become Green holders once they turn 21 in the future. Therefore why not provide them now. Out of all these possibilities, my best choice is that the CNMI should start opening and providing trade

school to local individuals soon because I believe that we should provide our local people with jobs. As satisfactorily can completely resolve this community issue that the CNMI needs to fix.

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